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Citizens' Reflection on Democracy and Disaster in Nepal in the Wake of the 2015 Earthquake

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Abstract

On April 25, 2015, Nepal was hit by a massive earthquake. Thousands of lives were lost. Extensive damage to infrastructure and property was reported. Using 30 interviews, I firstly examine how the people survived in the early days of the disaster. Secondly, I discuss how the citizens of Nepal, perceived democracy as a political system that is still novel for them, in the aftermath of the crisis. The interviewees reflected on the government's response to the earthquake. Evidently, the study highlights the disjuncture between the kinds of relief a democratic state is expected to provide for the citizens and the state's actual response to the needs of the earthquake survivors. Nepal has adopted democracy since 1990, however, it has failed to deliver on its promises, and people are thus ambivalent about the system. However, in the final analysis, it becomes apparent that people are unwilling to revert back to the old autocratic system. The conclusions of the study compel one to consider certain social processes. What affects citizens' expectations of their government in the aftermath of a major disaster is contingent upon how states have acted in normal times. The state's response to disasters might be influenced by what citizens expect from the state in the first place, thus, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, a democratic society is preferred by most, and the only way for the government to be more robust is to compel the leaders to adhere to the laws and regulations and operate according: those who break the laws must be made accountable.

Keywords: community, democracy, disaster, sociology, state

Introduction

Natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, require high levels of government involvement and intervention. Regardless of the great advances in modern technology, earthquakes are events that cannot be predicted accurately. Moreover, governments cannot preclude a natural disaster such as an earthquake from happening-they are limited: the only action possible is to prepare in anticipation in case of such an emergency; and mitigate their effects. Responses may involve a variety of social and organizational processes-disasters often highlight the success or failure of policy choices mandated by governments. Thus, government response after a natural disaster like an earthquake can become an index, which can be used to measure and expose the competence and effectiveness of governance. The different types of strategies that are adopted by the state to address the challenges in the aftermath of a disaster, and the citizens' response to such strategies, can also be examined to explore the relationship between state and society.

Several studies have examined the success or the failure in the response, and management of disasters by governments (Levitt, & Whitaker 2009; Bytzek, 2008; Thomas &Waterman, 2008). This paper is unique, in that it examines the role of the state after a major disaster, as perceived by the citizens. More importantly, it examines the relationship between the state and society, and the expectations and reactions of citizens of Nepal of their government, in the aftermath of a major earthquake, which hit the country in April/May 2015. Concomitantly the crisis provided an opportunity to examine the role of the, relatively new, Nepalese democratic state in managing the affairs of the land.

Definitions of what constitutes 'a disaster' typically include a clause to the effect that events are on such a scale that local capacities have been overwhelmed: thus, the vital role of the state. This implies a need to analyze the nature and capacity of the state (Picou et al., 2010). Some democratic states like the United States (Brunsma et al., 2010; Levitt & Whitaker, 2009) and Mexico (Jalali, 2002) have been critiqued in their response to crisis while the German Socialist partly because of the way it responded to a flood crisis in year was reelected to power (Bytzek, 2008). From this, we can infer that not all democratic states are inevitably equipped to manage crisis automatically. In this manner how states respond to disasters, and how well organized and effective they are in managing the crisis have been extensively scrutinized. The examination of a crisis and the state's response has become a tool to gauge the effectiveness of governance be they democratic or otherwise. Apparently, citizens' perception of the state's handling of the crisis in Nepal provided an opportunity to understand people's expectations and comprehension of a democratic state.

Accordingly, I conducted a qualitative study, and people who were severely affected by the disaster were

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interviewed. What the respondents recalled about the quake, and their perceptions of the government's response to the disaster, gives us an insight into the complicated nature of citizens' expectations from their governments, especially in a young democracy- this study attempts to comprehend citizens' expectations of their government in times of crisis. Central to liberal thought, is the idea that individual citizens act rationally to advance their own interests, and that the role of the state is to protect citizens in the exercise of their rights (Oldfield, 1990, p. 2). Moving beyond this hegemonic understanding of the liberal state, I examine how citizens in a young democracy, construct ideas of accountability, and responsibility, from those that govern them, in times of crisis. The crisis, after the massive earthquake, provided an opportune context to examine what citizens expected their democratically elected government to do on their behalf.

In order to understand how the respondents faired during the disaster, and their perception of democracy, and the role of the state, questions pertaining to these areas of inquiry were posed. First off, the respondents discussed how they were able to survive the quake, and who came to their rescue. Secondly, the respondents recalled how the state behaved in those early days of the disaster, and finally, they got the opportunity to reflect upon democracy, and national politics. Ultimately, this research provides us with a better understanding of what democracy means, and how a democratic state should potentially operate, according to ordinary citizens of a young democracy.

Sociology, state-society relationship

Interest in the relationship between the state and society has occupied sociologists since the time of Karl Marx (The German Ideology, 1947). For Marx, the capitalist liberal state is an alienating institution for the proletariat. He viewed the state to be the executive branch of the bourgeoisie, whose main function was to manage their affairs. The relationship between the state and society can be improved, only with the dissipation of capitalism, and the bourgeoisie state (Marx & Engels, 1848). For others, the role of the liberal state is more complex. On the one hand, the state has an interest in the accumulation of capital, and the expansion of capitalist, as the capitalist state's survival is dependent on the bourgeoisie, however, in order to claim legitimacy, the state has to also act on behalf of all the citizens (O'Connor, 1973). Thus, the relation between the state and society is complex. One important question that has been asked especially for states of the Global South is what does the state do, or what can the state do? Two different views are discernible in this context (Riaz & Basu, 2010). The first model is the service delivery model: and this model insists that the primary role of the state is to provide a range of services in particular law and order, public goods, social security, and mainly welfare distribution. The second is the social transformation model. According to this model, the primary role of the state is more challenging and critical, as it needs to transform the society from a pre-capitalist and pre-industrial societies, into a dynamic and essentially industrial model (Khan, 2010, as cited in Riaz & Basu, 2010). Furthermore, the models are not mutually exclusive as states are expected to play both roles simultaneously.

The Nepalese Context: Brief Review

In order to understand the effects of the earthquake, and put it into a context, it becomes necessary to briefly discuss the challenges that this young democracy has been facing in recent history. Nepal is landlocked bordering India on the East, West, and South and China on the North. The country is situated in the middle portion of the Hindu Kush Himalayan Region. A combination of rugged topography, high reef, active tectonic process, and intensive monsoon rain has made the fragile environment vulnerable to a variety of hazards, and disasters (Nepal Disaster Report [NDR], 2015). Nepal had been ruled by monarchs, or ruling family, for most of its modern history in relative isolation (Whelpton, 2005). Nepal adopted multi-party democracy in 1991, after popular protests. However, the new system was unable to fulfill its promise of delivering greater economic opportunities or better politics and governance (Housden, 2009). It was within this context that in February 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal initiated a decade-long civil war (Gobyn, 2009). The civil war ended with a peace agreement, and Nepal was declared a republic in 2008 (Adhikari, 2014). Despite the peace agreement that has been held, a permanent settlement has been very challenging to achieve. "The struggle for power continued to dominate Nepali politics" and "chaos and instability persisted" even after the peace settlement of 2008 (Adhikari, 2014). According to the World Bank, Nepal falls under the low-income category of countries. It has a population of 28.09 million, with a GNP per capita of $970. Life expectancy is 70 years and the poverty rate is 15% (World Bank Report, 2018).

The 2015 Earthquake and the State Response

A 7.6 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal on April 25, 2015, at 11:56 am local time. The epicenter was a village 81 km northwest of the capital city Kathmandu (NDR, 2015). By June 7, 2015, more than 300 aftershocks, greater than 3.3 magnitudes scale had followed. Four aftershocks were greater than magnitude 6.0, including one measuring 6.8, that struck on May 12, 2015 (NDR, 2015). The earthquake destroyed homes, historical monuments, and infrastructure such as dams, roads, and bridges, and they triggered an ongoing series of landslides exacerbated by the monsoon (Warner, Hindnam, & Snellinger, 2015). "Around nine thousand people died in the initial aftermath, and another twenty-four thousand injured, and an estimated 2 million people were made homeless" (Warner, Hindnam, & Snellinger, 2015). More than six hundred thousand houses were fully damaged with three hundred thousand partially damaged (NDR, 2015).

It is estimated that the total value of the disaster effects caused by the earthquake is equivalent to 8.7 billion US dollars (NDR, 2015). The disaster affected millions of Nepalese citizens. In addition to the intensity of the earthquake, other risk factors present in Nepal, include high population density, uneven development, political unrest, and insufficient or inefficient disaster management system (Subedi, 2019).

> Broadly speaking the roles and responsibilities of states in relation to humanitarian aid during a disaster is four-fold. They are responsible for calling a crisis, and inviting international aid; they provide assistance and protection themselves; they are responsible for monitoring and coordinating external assistance, they set the regulatory and legal frameworks governing assistance. (Harvey, 2009, p. 2)

Taking these cues, the Nepalese state response following the earthquake is briefly summarized. A brief description of the initial response seems necessary, to juxtapose it with what the perception of the citizens was of the state and the leadership during the crisis. Immediately after the earthquake, there was chaos, confusion, and distress. However, within two hours the National Emergency Operation Centre at the Ministry of Home Affairs was activated, and a meeting was held to initiate the relief and response efforts (NDR, 2015). A crisis was declared, and an appeal was made for international assistance. Security forces were mobilized immediately for search and rescue operations. Helicopters were deployed to remote areas for search and rescue by the Nepalese army. Search and rescue teams were also sent from India, China, and the United States (NDR, 2015). A total number of 12,295 people were rescued by air, and land units (NDR, 2015).

"A number of volunteer groups, local people, youths and civil society provided significant assistance to the affected people during the response (NDR, 2015). Several international and local NGOs Red Cross and Red Crescent societies" and the United Nations Organization supported from the beginning of the response. A considerable amount of aid was distributed by various social organizations private and corporations (NDR, 2015).

Despite the various actions by the government, there were also some severe limitations. According to some, the search and rescue carried out by the security personnel of Nepal and foreign team was commendable, but it was slow and inadequate, and they failed to reach remote places on time and was not well organized (Markinen, 2015). As Rodriguez and Barnshaw (2006) argue, "disasters and vulnerability are a reflection of how societies are organized." The challenges that the Nepalese state encountered in its humanitarian efforts were not just the problems created by the earthquake, but rather the country's political instability which began in the 1990s, and its inability to form a functioning governing system (Markinen, 2015). The inability of the government to write up a constitution, its economic condition along with the geographical challenges undermined the relief efforts. Local council elections were not held in 18 years. Many held the view that had there been an elected body at local levels, the emergency assistance would have been much more effective and timelier (Neupane, 2015). Moreover, the prime minister was out of the country at the time and did not make an official statement until four days after the initial seismic shocks, leaving many to ask "where is our government" (Warner, Hindnam, & Snellinger, 2015).

Method

Prior research indicates that both qualitative, and quantitative methods, are useful in disaster research (Browne & Peck, 2014). The objective of this study was to explore the role of the state; as understood by citizens; primarily, in a crisis. Some surveys and opinion polls have been done in Nepal; to gauge people's perception of the political parties and the issues associated with the "new" Nepal (Sharma & Khakda, 2011). However, these surveys are limited in that they did not do an extensive examination of people's perception of democracy in Nepal, and how it is affecting their everyday lives. A qualitative approach thus seemed conducive, as it allows the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge about the views of the respondents. It also allows the participants to use their own voice in reflecting on their experience and thinking of alternatives. Thus, thirty adults that were affected by the earthquake, and who were living in Kathmandu valley, were interviewed between June 15 and July 15, two months after the earthquake. A purposeful sampling method was used. First, a list of various characteristics that the participants should have was devised. Then people who could suggest potential participants were contacted. As the aim of the study was to understand what ideas citizens had about their government, respondents from various walks of life were selected to get diverse perspectives. In to get a more robust view of the issue people from various backgrounds were selected. Out of the total number of respondents, a few of them had some formal education, and some had college degrees. Three of them were unable to read or write, and many did not have any formal education. In terms of employment, those with some education worked in advertisement and marketing, while the majority were office workers, servants, drivers and maids, farmers, and guards of residents. Each interview lasted between one hour and two hours. After receiving consent from the interviewees, the interviews were recorded using digital voice recorders. The interviews were then translated and transcribed verbatim.

Grounded theory was used to guide this research project. "Grounded theory is a structured, yet flexible methodology. This methodology is appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon; the aim being to produce or construct new knowledge" (Tie et al., 2019). Also, grounded theorists do not do an extensive literature search of the substance area of investigation that characterizes most traditional behavioral and social science research methodologies (Hanson & Woodside, 2009). The purpose of minimizing preconceptions in Grounded Theory is to be more aware of what is relevant for the participant, rather than what is relevant for the researcher (Hanson & Woodside, 2009). Grounded theory provides useful tools to learn about individual perceptions and feelings, and assist researchers to make connections between processes, events, and perceptions (Hanson & Woodside, 2009). It focuses on identifying key components and categories of social phenomenon and how they relate to each other.

As my emphasis in this study was on the important question about citizens' perception of democracy, and the role of the state in times of crisis, an open-ended

questionnaire was used to extrapolate ideas and thoughts that the respondents had about the situation. Having a diverse group of respondents from many different kinds of professions, and walks of life, made the conclusions more robust. The study examined how Nepalese citizens faced the challenges in the aftermath of the earthquake, and what their perception was of the role of the Nepalese state. They also discussed their views on democracy, and what it means to them. The terms state and government are used interchangeably in this paper.

Data was analyzed using qualitative techniques referred to as descriptive and pattern coding. Once the interviews were translated, initial coding was conducted. The purpose of the initial coding is to start the process of comparing data and to look for differences and similarities (Tie et al., 2019). First, the participants' responses describing their experience of the earthquake were open coded. Secondly, the participant's responses of the role and the functions of the government during the disaster were open coded. These open codes produced a variety of concepts that were then put into different categories like the role of the community and social solidarity, the lack of state presence during the crisis, the meaning of democracy, and some problems they perceived with the democratic government of Nepal. An in-depth analysis of these categories was done in order to identify patterned relationships across these categories and discover similarities and differences in the data set. Once coding was complete, arguments were presented according to the themes that came out of the research.

Findings and Discussion

There are several themes that emerged from the interviews. Below, I provide a summary, followed by detailed explanations of the themes that emerged from the analysis.

The findings reveal that even in face of a major disaster, the participants did not have many expectations from their democratically elected government, thus, they had to rely on the local community to survive. In theory, they argued that the state could have acted in a more responsible manner, but in reality, they were not surprised by the inept behavior of the government. In the aftermath of the earthquake, participants began to reflect on the role of the local community and realized the importance of social networks. The findings reveal that democracy is understood by the participants in multiple ways. Some equated democracy with socio-economic development, while others considered democracy to be about elections and free speech and expression. However, the consensus was that democracy should improve the lives of all the citizens. Democracy, thus, far had not been able to deliver on its promises. Many argued that as their lives and livelihoods, had not improved significantly, they were still questioning the merits of the system. They claimed that the challenges that democracy faced in Nepal, were due to the old and archaic ideas of the political leaders, and their inability to govern; the presence of rampant corruption, and a culture of dependency among the people. Below, I discuss the major themes that were articulated by the respondents in their reflection on their local communities, and the role of the state in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Theme one: the major role of local communities and social networks, leading to increases in social solidarity in the aftermath of the disaster.

Theme two: the lack of state presence, and engagement in the lives of ordinary people.

Theme three: the understanding of democracy as a political system, and the major caveats in the proper functioning of democracy in Nepal.

The major role of the local communities and increasing social solidarity

One of the major themes that came through the analysis was the role that the local community played in the aftermath of the quake. All of the respondents highlighted the positive role played by the local community, while at the same time they accentuated the problems that they had with how the state had failed in performing its duties diligently. The first challenge, that all of the respondents faced, after the earthquake was, housing. Either their houses had completely collapsed, or they suffered major damage. In order to accommodate their families to live in temporarily, most of them relied on the help of extended families and neighbors. The respondents felt like victims and claimed that they did not receive any meaningful assistance from their government. Around 10% of the respondents reported that they received some basic food from an agency two weeks after the earthquake, and they were not sure if the help came from the government or some non-governmental organization. All of them had to be self-reliant. The local communities were compelled to practice solidarity, pool their resources, and live collectively in those uncertain days. As major aftershocks lingered on for weeks, people were unable to resume normal life and had to share food and accommodation with the community. Since they were unable to tap into the state resources, or receive any meaningful assistance from the state, they were compelled to find support within the local communities.

> The local community helped, even the staff from my office, were involved in helping others. I think the local organizations were the most helpful during the crisis, but the state did not provide us with any help. (single woman with some education).

A significant factor was not only the tangible help that they received from their local communities, but the moral support that they received from families that lived far away. Many respondents emphasized the fact that their families stayed in touch, and this gave them the courage to remain strong and positive during the crisis. Accordingly, many expected a similar gesture from the state. They argued that even if the government was unable to help them through tangible means, they could have at least made some symbolic gesture, that could have manifested their understanding of the problems that the people were facing, and that the government was concerned about their well-being. For example, one respondent commented

> help also came from the boy's club, the football club. They visited us only five hours after the earthquake and even when the after-shocks were strong. Help also came from outside. INGO and NGO also helped. Tents came from China. People

> came from outside to help. The government did 5% and the remaining 95% was done by others. Neighbors helped each other 100%. We did not have much but we shared what we had with others. (married woman with some education)

What became very obvious, through the interviews, was the willingness of people to take care of not only their immediate family but also provide assistance to the old and the sick. For instance, one responder explained how their neighborhood was filled with mainly old people. They also had a hospital nearby. The situation in the hospital was also dire. Therefore, he and the people in his neighborhood came together, and established a community kitchen, and cooked and fed more than 400 people including the sick, for more than a week. Such gestures of compassion and generosity were further made evident when another respondent claimed that he had broken his leg, and as he had no money with him, his neighbor gave him some money that enabled him to get to a hospital. There are many more examples, which all illustrate the importance of the local community in providing help and cooperation, which made it easier for them to survive during the disaster.

Similar to other studies on disaster (Moreno, 2018; Patterson et al., 2010) this study too found that the role of the community was crucial in the immediate crisis following the earthquake. More than 90% of the respondents repeatedly emphasized how the local community and their neighbors were fundamental to their survival. In the midst of the chaos, right after the 2010 earthquake in Chile, "collective actions emerged spontaneously in communities and people were able to survive and cope with the disaster" (Moreno, 2018). The most common strategies were rescuing neighbors, running community kitchens (Moreno, 2018). The people in the Nepalese case similarly helped in rescue efforts, pooled their resources, and lived-in tents along with each other. Even people who had conflict during normal times ended their disputes. Thus, many felt that even though the quake brought destruction in the physical and the material realms, the quake also brought communities and people together, and increased social solidarity. The activation of community capacities such as participation, solidarity, and social networks was evident following the hours of the disaster (Morena, 2018). There are many such examples of community solidarity after hurricane Katrina. The community response after hurricane Katrina demonstrated the importance of local knowledge, resources, and cooperative strategies in determining their survival and recovery (Patterson et al., 2010). In sum, community responses to major disasters illustrate the potential of communities to mobilize internal resources, and capacities to deal with, and recover from disasters.

Lack of state presence

A major theme that repeatedly came about in the interviews was the dissatisfaction that every single respondent, had with the government response during the crisis. Every single respondent displayed different degrees of disdain towards the state and the leadership. Most of them considered the government of being week and ineffective. In general, this conclusion was further reinforced by the inability of the elected government to promulgate a constitution. And further, the manner in which the state functioned during the crisis, made the citizens to be more cynical towards the elected officials and question the government. The country was declared a republic in 2008, and yet the government had been unable to write a constitution by 2015, the time of the earthquake. Thus, they claimed that if the state was unable to achieve much during normal times, what could they expect the state to do during the chaotic period of the earthquake? They realized that in the initial days of the earthquake there was a lot of confusion and chaos and that the leaders must have been scared for their own lives. It was, therefore, understandable that nothing much was done in the beginning. However, when the state did not do anything for them even after two weeks, they were very upset. One respondent said the following:

> We elected them into office. The government not being effective for a few days after the earthquake is understandable, as there was so much chaos, and the leaders were scared for their own lives, and safety, but they should have done a better job after that. So now, I can definitely say, that they are stupid. They have crossed the line. Now we have no faith or trust in the government. They will do nothing. (single man with some education).

Most of them also claimed that the upper positions of the ruling parties were filled with old men who were unable to build a consensus and govern effectively. No matter which party got elected and came to power, (11 governments came to power between 1990 and 2010 (Riaz & Basu, 2010) they were unable to unify the country and rule on the behalf of all the citizens. This, they claimed, was the consequence of the absence of a sense of nationhood. Giving the illustration of the Indian government, and its role in the aftermath of the Gujarat earthquake (a major earthquake had occurred in northern India in 1997) some respondents claimed that the Indian government was able to successfully address the problems, as the government was genuinely concerned about the well- being of the people. Besides, they claimed that the Indian people are more nationalists, and they invest most of their wealth in their own country, and thereby contribute to the economic viability of their country and the people. But the Nepalese citizens, on the contrary, deposit all their monies in foreign banks, and thus they do not contribute to the economic betterment of their own society. This demonstrated that not only the state but also the Nepalese citizens lack an understanding of patriotism and nationhood. Therefore, the problems were not only with the government but also with the citizens at large.

> Look at India which became independent much later than us. Look where India is now. It is not that they are not corrupted there is corruption for 1 or 5 rupees. But they are also very patriotic. Rich Indians keep more than 50% of their wealth in their country. Invest in their country, and provide employment for Indian people. And look at ours. All rich people want to bank their money in foreign banks. These Nepalese have no sense of patriotism. It is only about themself. They want to look good and have plenty for themselves. They do not care about the country. Thus, I do not see any good in the future

of Nepal frankly speaking." (married man with a college degree).

This quote highlights the importance of nationalism for some of the respondents. The term is ambiguous and can sometimes acquire a negative connotation. According to some, nationalism today has acquired a bad reputation. In the minds of some Western intellectuals, it is a dangerous ideology (Bieber, 2018). However, to the respondents of this study nationalism is associated with civic patriotism, and national pride: An emphasized sense of connection with the country and its people. The term nationalism was used in conjunction with the term patriotism, and both were used as something positive: Positive criteria that needs to develop for a democracy to be successful. They expected the democratically elected officials to be both patriotic, and nationalists: act on the behalf of all the citizens and their interests. The term is used as a means of explaining how the state should work in the interest of all, irrespective of class or ethnic divisions. They argued that for a nation to move forward, everyone needed to collaborate, and conscientiously, execute their responsibilities. The question that arose was how this characteristic could be inculcated. What needed to happen for all of the citizens, both leaders and the citizens to consolidate, and work to improve all lives?

The remedy for this, many argued, is for both the political parties' leaders and citizens alike to change their mentality. They argued that structural change began with the end of the monarchy, and authoritarian rule, however, a culture that is more amenable for democratic progress seems to be severely lacking. Parochial attachment, and the state leaders helping only their party members, seemed problematic for the majority of the respondents, as they claimed that a democratically elected government is responsible for the welfare of all the citizens equally. Thus, this parochial attachment has blinded the leaders, and it was the foremost impediment in the development of nationalism.

> The people in leadership positions only think of themselves; people who already have resources are getting help, but poor people like us did not get any help; Relief should be given to the poor who have nothing, but the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer…it was like this before the earthquake and now it has doubled; the problems have been exacerbated; people with connection get everything, and people like us nothing. (married woman with no education).

Concerns with corruption and the leaders lack of accountability, and transparency were problematic for all of the respondents. Many claimed that corruption was part of all democratic governments from the Indian government to the government of the United States. What differed in the Nepalese case was the matter of degree. One respondent argued that

> There is still time for the government to implement well. All governments are corrupt. So our government too could be corrupt to some degree. If they got 100 rupees, then they can use 10 rupees for themselves, but use the remaining 90 rupees on the country and the people. But no, the opposite is happening here. The government devours 90 percent and invests 10% on the country and the people. Thus, what can be achieved when this is happening?" (married man with college degree)

The issue of corruption and mismanagement came through, especially with the handling of foreign and domestic donations after the earthquake. The monies that were donated by both foreign and local entities were all pooled into the "Prime Minister's Fund." The distribution of the funds was centralized. However, the problem was not only this, but more with the lack of transparency. Citizens had no idea on how the funds were being distributed, and if it was been given to people that needed it the most. Many claimed that most of the fund that was donated, failed to reach the people, but rather ended up in the coffers of the leadership. This is how the system worked. Similarly, some of the donated articles like tents, which came from China, were usurped by ministers, who sold them to businessmen, and thus profited from what was given to the general population by a foreign entity. This, they claimed epitomized the height of corruption. What kinds of expectations, could citizens possibly have in this kind of a situation? It was very natural that they did not have much hope and expectations from their government. They admitted that the state would not come to help them and that they needed to be self-reliant.

Some made the claim that the changes that Nepal underwent from authoritarian rule to a multiparty democracy, had not fundamentally changed the feudal, and personalized characteristics of the governing bodies. "The promise of democratic institutions, new forms of political practice, and a culture of citizen-state relations, based on accountable governance was almost immediately thwarted, by emerging party dynamics. Reflecting the hierarchical nature of Nepali society, these older, high-caste men established personalized and centralized rule" (Tamang, 2015). "Sustaining patronage networks became vital in order to maintain political cadres and support in the emerging landscape of democratic competition. The result was the informal distribution of state resources through political patronage networks." (Riaz & Basu, 2010). Thus, this begs the question of the relationship between the political system, and political culture. The political system had definitely changed, however, the practice of governance and the characteristics of those that governed had not changed in any significant manner. Governance, based on personal relationship and patronage is often touted as being part of traditional society, however, these characteristics do not seem to change fundamentally, even with the introduction of modernity, and a multiparty democracy. Political power has remained personal rather than institutional, with patrimonial tradition, and patron-client relationships dominating all aspects of the government (Riaz & Basu, 2010). Democratic ethos has not taken root in the broadest sense. The fact that the citizens did not expect any assistance from the state, as they lacked political connections, further manifests the fundamental weakness of the Nepalese democracy, as one of the fundamental tenets of a democracy, is for the states to govern on the behalf of all and not just a few.

> I am not interested in the government's activities, so I do not

> care what they are doing, or not doing. I am not angry with the government; I just do not care. The government has done nothing before the earthquake and it has done nothing after it." (single man with some education).

Thus, there was this underlined dichotomy in the response of most of the respondents. On the one hand, they believed that the democratically elected government has equal responsibility towards all citizens. However, concurrently they also did not have very high expectations of the state working on the behalf of the mass. From the interviews, it became apparent that the majority of the respondents thought that the Nepalese state was weak and incapable of handling the crisis in any meaningful way. They argued that, as the state remained ineffective during normal times, it was no surprise that it was unable to do much for them, in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Most of them showed disdain towards the elected officers and vowed that they could not reelect them in the next election. They understood the power of the vote. However, the irony is that as they had been governed by more than 15 prime-ministers in the period between 2001 and 2015, they did not think that a better government was likely to be elected any time soon. "They were all the same, old, inept, and corrupt." It seems that democracy has been undermined by corruption, and it has become difficult to trust its leadership, and its governing mechanisms.

Democracy and problems with the democratic governments of Nepal

The final theme pertained to their understanding of democracy and how they perceived it functioning in Nepal. Nepal gained democracy after a mass movement in 1990. However, political stability was not achieved for a very long time. It can be debated even now if the state is a successful democratic state, or a failed state (Riaz & Basu 2010).

Democracy is one of the most used and contested concepts in the social sciences (Parry & Moran, 1994). While definitions and operationalizations of democracy vary quite a bit, we can make a broad distinction between minimal and maximal definitions of democracy (Baviskar & Malone, 2004). The minimal definition focus on the importance of "means" that are procedures such as fair elections, respect for human rights, and universal suffrage. In contrast, maximal definitions include not only democratic procedures but also "ends" or outputs such as economic equality and social services (Baviskar and Malone, 2004).

In spite of its various definitions, democracy in essence is viewed as citizens' participation in deliberative and decision-making processes and is often presented as the prerequisite, for the setting up of a more equitable and just society (Bonvin, Laruffa, & Rosenstein, 2018). The respondents conceptualized democracy in a variety of ways. However, the most consensus was that for all of them a democratic society has a government elected by the people. Thus, fair elections, where all adults were allowed, and encouraged to participate, were considered to be one of the prime features of a democracy. They also explained that free speech was inherent to democracy. One of the respondents argued that democracy was not only about the formation of a government, but it was also about governance and society at large.

> Let us not get bogged down with this terminology…however democracy is about not just one person but the whole of society coming together to select someone to represent us and our interests. It is to create a representative body to govern based on the selection of the people. It involves voting rights-but for me democracy is more than just voting rights –it implies a more exhilarated economic development, social development, education, health care, and all the people participating in the progress of their society based on their qualification. It is not just about voting, or headcounts it is about the real participation of citizens in all parts of society. The government should take care and give attention to the various needs and requirements of the population. Each and every need of the people should be addressed. That could be a democracy. (single woman with a college degree)

Almost all of the respondents held positive views about democracy: That it is the best form of government. However, they were much more ambivalent about the consequences of democracy. In theory and procedurally, they considered Nepal as democratic, since the people's movement of 1990. However, the system lacked credibility as it had been unable to live up to its promises. The path of the political transition in Nepal has been all the more criticized and deeply regretted by the Nepali people because in the aftermath of the 1990 'spring awakening' expectations regarding the transformation of the state, politics and societal forces had been very high and the disappointment was, subsequently, very deep (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2001). One of the respondents a driver said that "I had fun joining the people's movement it provided entertainment, but now with the condition of the country, and especially the economy, where inflation is on the rise on a daily basis, I do not believe that anything came out of the mass movement and democracy." Many of the respondents, who are inundated with the challenges of meeting their daily needs, are not too sure about democracy, especially in terms of its deliverable strength. Asked if they were better off with the monarchy, a few agreed, that in terms of security they were better off, as the earlier system was restrictive, and thus people "knew their place in the social hierarchy" people were more controlled.

Some of the female respondents revealed major concerns about the deteriorating security situation, especially for women. They believed that sexual abuse and sexual predatory behaviors were on the rise and that women were neither safe in the public, or the private realms. These are some concerns that the women had with democracy. More freedom implied that people could do whatever they desired, and there was no person, or institution to keep a check on their behavior. Proper checks, most of them argued was essential to control, and balance the freedoms which came with democracy. In general, the respondents understood that democracy is the uniquely valued political system of the age, and it needed to be protected by building institutions, and a common culture of accountability. Even though they are critical of the way that democracy is functioning in Nepal, the majority do not desire to revert

back to the old system of autocratic rule of the monarch. They made the argument that a democratic government needs to follow the laws that have been promulgated and that it should function within the boundaries of the constitution. They, however, believed that the governmental bodies are working contrary to what has been laid down in the formal laws and regulations. This is reminiscent of the term "democratization of powerlessness" a condition in which formal rules and regulations exist only on paper (Ake, 1995, as cited in Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2001). Many cited that in recent years there has been an explosion of financial scandals, where people in high offices are being implicated. However, none have gone to jail, or have been penalized in any meaningful ways. They argued that numerous state officials impede the functioning of their offices while exploiting their positions to put their private interests first. Thus, the problem of corruption has been highlighted by almost all the respondents. In the previous era, there was only one person that exploited the country, and that was the king. But now, they argued that all the politicians that have access to resources use it for their benefit, without any concerns for the citizens at large. The prime example they cited, was the misuse of resources in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Studies have shown that sometimes governments have lost their legitimacy because of disasters leading to regime change. A case in point being the creation of Bangladesh whose secession from Pakistan began in the aftermath of a disaster created by a cyclone in 1970 (Jalali, 2002). Similarly, the mismanagement of the Mexican earthquake crisis in 1985 severely threatened the legitimacy of the governing party of the PRI (Jalali, 2002). Similarly, the failure of the government in the context of hurricane Katrina in the US in 2006 has been well documented: U.S. Senate committee that investigated Katrina characterized the government performance as a long-term failure (Greene, 2009). Both Mexico, and the United States are established democratic societies, and their failure to deal with a natural disaster makes us realize that democratic systems are not automatically equipped to deal with disasters effectively. The failure of the less established democratic Nepalese state in this context should not come as a surprise.

Conclusion

Most of the respondents in the study did not anticipate any institutional assistance, especially from the Nepalese state, after the earthquake. On the one hand, they claimed that the contemporary state was created through the public participation in the democratic process, but on the other, they did not foresee the state working on the behalf of the public. Many were not surprised by the lack of state presence, and its agencies, in their local communities in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake.

This finding suggests that the respondents held contradictory views. In theory, they claimed that it is the duty of a democratic government to assist all the citizens equally especially in times of crisis. But in practice, they were not surprised by the lack of state involvement during the crisis. How can this contradiction between theory and practice be reconciled? Why were the citizens not demanding a more active role in their democratic government? What is it about the Nepalese democracy that the legitimacy of the government was not questioned? Even when the government was unable to adequately do a simple job like distribute donated articles given to earthquake victims, they did not question the legitimacy of the state. Some have argued that natural disasters often undermine democratic legitimacy in less established democracies (Carlin et al., 2013). However, in the Nepalese case instead of questioning the state or demanding assistance, they relied on family networks and the local community for survival. How can this be explained? One can make the argument that in spite of the people's movement and the political revolution of the 1990s and the creation of a democracy, Nepalese society has not yet created a political culture, where citizens expect the state to come to their rescue in times of crisis. They still follow the older tradition of completely relying on personal networks. This conclusion of the study compels one to uncover how the theories and understanding of democracy by ordinary people can be transformed into practical actions demanded by the citizens from their democratic state in less established democracies: how can understanding be transformed into practice?

Democracy, in the popular imaginary, is a government of the people, which is created and sustained through inclusivity and broad participation of the citizens. For most of the respondents, the processes of creating a democratic government was important. Fair and peaceful elections without interference, and the rule of law, were considered to be some of the main features of a democracy. However, many have not yet developed a vocabulary expressing the mutual and symbiotic relationship between the democratic state and citizens. They have not yet developed a culture of state expectation. If they had they could have demanded a more active role of the state in their lives during the crisis. And if the majority of the citizens had demanded a more active role from the state, then the state might have been compelled to act accordingly during the crisis. Thus, the lack of state engagement during the crisis became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The citizens did not really anticipate the state to play a major role during the crisis, and according to the state did not.

The respondents, however, made it clear that democracy should bring about many benefits like good governance, rule of law, freedom of speech, political stability, and economic development. This highlights the point that democracy is not an end in itself; it is rather a means to an end. This should be a reminder to leaders of what their primary obligations should be after they get elected into office. Here the role of the leadership becomes fundamental.

Some respondents were more focused on the social responsibilities of a democratic government. They were not concerned with the processes of creating a democracy, but rather of the social and economic responsibilities of a democratic government. However, one aspect of democracy, that was common to all the participants, was the rule of law. They expected the democratically elected government to function on the principles of the established laws and regulations. They did not think that anyone

person or any institution was above the law. Thus, one of the strongest critiques they made was, that some of the elected officials were not acting within the boundary of the laws and that such offenders needed to be brought to justice. The elected officials needed to be transparent in the decision-making process, and that they were accountable to their constituents.

Even though the majority of respondents have become weary about the leadership of the democratic government, they have not completely given up on the system itself. The majority of them claimed that democracy is the best form of government, and were anticipating a more progressive leader, who could be more successful in navigating the present challenges and bringing about genuine development of the Nepalese society.

The conclusion of the study needs to be considered in the context of the limited number of respondents studied. However, the implications that come out of the study must be taken seriously. Regular people, some with education, and others without any, are facing many challenges in their daily lives in the aftermath of the earthquake. They have questions and concerns about government and governance. They understand the implications of a democratic government and what its responsibilities are. However, it seems that they have not yet accepted the practical responsibilities of a democratic state. Thus, they did not demand anything from the state

Finally, the respondent cited that the rule of law should triumph any other considerations. For Nepal, to move forward, they claimed that the rulers, and people in positions of power, need to be compelled to function according to the laws of the land and refrain from indulging in corruption. The preeminent approach to sustaining a democratic state is by making the leadership accountable for their actions and activities. The first step in this direction involves controlling ubiquitous corruption through the legal system.

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